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ABSTRACT

English language instruction, which is considered very important in Japan, is offered in 90 percent of all secondary schools and is studied by almost all students, even though it is an elective subject. English is considered a cultural and commercial link with the western world and has been taught in Japan since the mid-nineteenth century. Most college students use English as their required foreign language, and hundreds of thousands of Japanese people study English through private language schools, company courses, and radio and television instruction. Most elementary schools, which are municipally controlled, do not provide foreign language instruction, but some elementary school students learn English through private schools as early preparation for academic competition. Most students begin English instruction in junior high school, at age twelve. Very few alternative languages are offered. Junior high and high school courses, which are rigidly controlled, provide preparation for university entrance examinations. Private high schools offer more class hours of English than do public schools. College entrance examinations often contain substantial English portions. Universities generally require two foreign languages, with English the most popular. English teacher education emphasizes traditional curricula, not teaching methodology or language proficiency. (MSE)

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TEACHING ENGLISH IN JAPAN

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce English education in Japan to people from other countries.

Introduction

English education is considered very important in Japan. English is offered in more than 99% of all junior highs and high schools (Hoshiyama: 104), and almost all students take it, even though it is an elective subject (Kumabe: 128-129). Foreign language study is required for many university degrees, and most students take English. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Japanese study English at private English conversation schools or in English courses offered by their companies. Both radio and television offer English courses for different levels of ability, and hundreds of thousands of Japanese people study English in this way.

Why do the Japanese study English? There are a number of reasons.

One of the original reasons that the Japanese had for studying foreign language —and one that has continued to be important—was to learn from the outside world. In last half of the 19th century, the Japanese people discovered that they were far behind Western countries in many areas. In order to learn about Western countries, their economies, systems of government, technology, etc., the Japanese needed to learn the languages of Western countries, particularly English, French and German. Since Japanese is used very little outside of Japan, other languages, particularly English, continue to be the means by which Japan learns from and about other countries.

In more recent years, the Japanese have also felt the necessity to express themselves to the outside world, to explain Japanese culture, ways of thinking, and positions on various issues to other people (Hisano: 6). As an increasing number of Japanese people go abroad, it is useful for them to be able to express themselves to people from other countries. Because English is becoming the main international language, it is natural that the Japanese would choose English as the foreign language with which to communicate with other people. The close postwar relationship between Japan and the U.S. has also influenced the choice of English.

For Japanese people, English is also a way to learn about other cultures. Since Japan is a relatively homogeneous country, it is especially important for the Japanese to learn about various cultures, and the ways of living and ways of thinking of other

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people. Doing so allows the Japanese to look at the world in new ways (Hisano: 7).

Studying English and the cultures of English-speaking people also gives Japanese people a greater insight into their own language and culture.

The History of English Education in Japan

English was first taught in Japan following the brief stop at Nagasaki of a British ship in 1808. Since the Japanese found that they could not communicate at all with the sailors from that ship, the Tokugawa government ordered the interpreters to add the study of English to their study of Dutch, French, and Russian. The first English teacher in Japan was a Dutchman who probably did not know much English himself (Omura: 91-93).

In 1853, after about three hundred years of restricted contact with other countries, Japan was forced to open by the Americans, and the study of English began in earnest. Two major methods emerged early in the history of English teaching in Japan. One emphasized correct pronunciation as well as meaning, and the other emphasized meaning and not pronunciation or syntax. It was observed that students who learned by the second method seemed to have better comprehension, while students who had learned by the first method were compared to "reading machines" with correct pronunciation but with little understanding of what they were reading (Omura: 94-95).

In the 1890's, a system of language teaching was established. English, the main foreign language, was compulsory in the middle and higher secondary schools; French and German were offered in higher schools as second foreign languages. Language study was closely associated with Westernization. English was mostly taught by native English speakers, including many Christian missionaries. English-medium classes were held at institutions of higher learning, and most textbooks came from the U.S. Many students with a good command of English were produced during this time. In the early 1900's, foreign texts and teachers were gradually replaced by Japanese ones. Japanese scholars who had studied abroad become influential in the field of English education. Some of their ideas seem amazingly up-to-date. For example, Kanda Naibu advocated use of the target language as much as possible in the classroom, exclusion or reduction of translation, extensive teaching of the target culture, and inductive learning of grammar. Despite Kanda, however, English became primarily a subject of academic study, mainly learned for the purpose of reading written texts, instead of as a means of communication.

In 1921, Harold E. Palmer, an English linguist and specialist in language teaching was invited to Japan as an advisor to the Ministry of Education (Monbu-sho). He advocated the Oral and Direct Methods. His methods were used in various parts of Japan and obtained good results. Unfortunately, they required a command of English far beyond that of most Japanese teachers of English and so

never came into general use.

Shortly before and during World War Ⅱ, the study of English was discouraged, because it was the "enemy language". However, this policy was reversed after the war. The school system was reorganized so that at present there are six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, three years of high school, and four years of college. Education is compulsory only through the third year of junior high school, but 94% of all Japanese junior high school graduates go on to high school (Nihon Kyoiku Nenkan Kanko Iinkai: 81). Foreign languages are offered as electives in the junior and senior high schools, and the most frequently offered foreign language is English.

English in Elementary Schools

There are three types of elementary schools in Japan—municipal, private, and those attached to national universities. More than 99% of the elementary schools in Japan are of the first type. They are rigidly controlled by the Ministry of Education, and their curricula do not include foreign languages. Some of the private and university-associated elementary schools provide English courses, so fewer than 1% of the elementary schools in Japan offer English (Nogami: 142). Half of these are in the Tokyo and Osaka metropolitan areas (Nogami: 149). Some of these offer English as part of the regular curriculum; others only offer it occasionally as an extra-curricular activity. English classes at the elementary level tend to emphasize oral/aural English rather than reading, and a few of them even have language laboratories.

Some elementary-level students study English at *jukus*—private "cram" schools that offer private tutoring in various subjects. The purpose of many *jukus* is to prepare students for entrance examinations to secondary schools and universities. In the Tokyo area, thirty percent of the elementary students attend *jukus* (Nihon Kodomo o Mamoru Kai: 228), though not all of them study English.

English in Junior High Schools

Most Japanese students start studying English when they enter junior high school at age twelve. The Ministry of Education does not require English in Japanese public secondary schools though some individual private schools may require it. However, due to the fact that English is an important factor—often a decisive one—on high school and university entrance examinations, almost all junior high school students take English (Kumabe: 124-125), although it is technically an elective. Very few junior high schools offer any alternative to English, and most students do not realize that it is, in fact, an elective. In addition to studying English at school, many students attend *jukus*. In the Tokyo area, 75% of the junior high students attend them (Nihon Kodomo o Mamoru Kai: 228). Almost all junior high students who attend *jukus* study English.

Public schools could offer up to five hours per week of English until 1981, when

the number of hours was reduced to three. The content of the English courses offered in public junior high schools is dictated by the Ministry of Education's Course of Study (Shido Yoryo). According to the Course of Study, the purpose of English education is to give students a practical command of written and spoken English and to promote understanding of the cultural and social backgrounds of English-speaking people (Kimizuka: 22). The Course of Study prescribes both minimum and maximum standards regarding what sounds, sentence patterns, vocabulary, and grammatical categories are to be taught in junior high English classes each year. For example, a list of 490 words must be taught, and up to 1,050 words can be taught in junior high school. The Course of Study also dictates which aspects of culture, geography, history, literature, and so on, should be included. It also supplies specific activities for developing different skills (Imura: 137).

The textbooks used in junior high English classes must be approved by the Ministry according to strict guidelines set down by it. Draft copies of proposed junior high textbooks are examined by Ministry officials and "outside experts," mostly school teachers and university professors, to see whether the texts conform to the guidelines. Textbooks for junior high schools are chosen by a district Board of Education for all the schools under its jurisdiction, with the advice of the prefectural Board of Education. Individual teachers in public junior high schools have no control over the texts used in their classes. There are only five different junior high school textbooks used in public schools, with one of them, *New Horizon*, used by the majority them. Students and teachers complain that the textbooks put too much emphasis on following the guidelines of the Ministry of Education regarding grammar and not enough on interesting content (Imura: 139).

English taught in junior high school is particularly important. For most students, this is their first formal education in English, and it is important that they make a good beginning. However, junior high school teachers are, as a rule, less well qualified than high school teachers (Kumabe: 131). Also, classes are large, with forty to forty-five students in each class. Many students start studying English in junior high school with eager anticipation, but due to the emphasis on memorization and learning about English, rather than using English for the purpose of communication, many soon lose interest.

Senior High School English Education

Like junior high school English classes, senior high school classes are controlled by the guidelines in the Ministry of Education's Course of Study. The goals listed in the Course of Study also apply to high school courses. As in junior high schools, the content of courses—the vocabulary, grammatical items, etc.—are prescribed for each level. A maximum of 1,900 new words may be introduced (Monbusho: 130-134), so a high school graduate has usually learned almost three thousand words

while in secondary school.

The content of high school courses is heavily influenced by the content of university entrance examinations. Students often are only motivated to study aspects of English that will be helpful on university entrance examinations thus pressing high school teachers to prepare students for them.

Most public high schools offer four to six hours of English per week. English I, which students take during their first year of high school, is an extension of junior high school English. (Unfortunately, there is a gap between the level of English in the third year of junior high school and that of the first year of high school.) English Ⅱ is offered during the second and third years of high school. It is supplemented by English ⅡA (speaking), English ⅡB (reading), and English ⅡC (writing).

Some high schools also offer supplementary English lessons before or after school or during vacations to help prepare students for university entrance exams. Students may attend English classes at *jukus* or may have a private tutor. In the Tokyo area, thirty-three percent of the high school students attend *jukus* (Nihon Kodomo o Mamoru Kai: 228) where most of them study English.

The typical high school English class is based on a textbook emphasizing reading and grammar, often with a supplementary reader and/or grammar text. Like junior high textbooks, they must be approved by the Ministry of Education. In the case of high school textbooks, the texts are chosen by the school rather than at the district level. Still, individual teachers do not choose the textbooks for their own classes. Students prepare for a class in advance by writing Japanese equivalents next to English words and phrases. In class, a student reads the resulting translation of a paragraph or lesson. The teacher reads a model or correct translation. Much of the class may be spent discussing difficult grammatical points. The teacher also models reading aloud the English version of the lesson, and students repeat after the teacher (Hisano: 14-15).

For grammar classes, the textbook is divided into grammatical categories. Each category is accompanied by examples, explanations, and exercises.

Composition classes consist of translation of Japanese into English, not free writing. The Japanese is usually in short sentences, unconnected in content.

The number of teachers who are working to improve high school English classes is increasing. Gradually, more teachers are emphasizing the communicative aspects of English, teaching about other cultures, making use of audio-visual equipment, and so on.

Private schools often have more hours of English per week than do public schools. They typically offer five to six hours of reading and grammar and one to two hours of conversation.

University Entrance Examinations

University entrance examinations usually include sections on translation from English into Japanese and visa versa, reading passages with questions on the content, and items where students must choose the correct words to fill in the blanks, to test knowledge of grammar, as well as questions on sometimes hair-splitting points of prescriptive grammar. Some questions are so difficult, tricky or archaic that even native English speakers have difficulty answering them (Ogasawara: 92). The entrance examinations do not emphasize English as it is actually used but rather "grammar book English". Most examinations do not require performance in English. Even translation items put emphasis on understanding of the nuances of Japanese grammar rather than on the ability to express oneself in English (Kumabe: 126). Very few entrance examinations include sections that test students' ability in aural English. In general, entrance examinations require much knowledge about the language, but offer little or no opportunity to demonstrate ability to perform in English.

There are two types of entrance examinations. One is a uniform qualifying exam (Kyotsuu Ichiji Shiken), administered nationally and used by many national universities and some other public universities. In addition, schools use their own independently generated and administered exams.

Tertiary Level English Courses

Most four-year universities require all students to take two foreign languages. Non-English majors take a minimum of eight to twelve credits in the first foreign language—usually English—and four credits in the second—usually French or German. Non-English majors in junior colleges take two to four credits of English, and English majors take 46 credits in language and literature. As between junior high and high school, there is a large gap between the level of English required in the third year of high school and the first year of university.

More than 3,500 college textbooks related to English have been published in Japan, with 150 more published each year. Sixty-nine percent of these are readers, and most of them contain only prose—English or American novels or essays and articles (Koike: 206), typically with notes in Japanese. Most do not have exercises to help students understand the readings. Many teachers choose their textbooks according to their own interests—often literature—rather than according to the students' goals and interests.

At the university level, most English classes are reading classes. Many college English teachers are literature majors with little or no training in EFL or applied linguistics. Professors generally ask students in the reading class to translate sentences into Japanese, covering from one to five pages of the textbook in the ninety-minute class period. Most textbooks contain essays or prose, so students do not have opportunities to develop strategies for dealing with other literary forms,

such as dialogues, newspaper articles, advertisements, and brochures (Kitao and Kitao: 7). Studies of students' reading ability show that they have particular difficulties in dealing with these literary forms (Kitao and Miyamoto, 1982: 164).

As in high school, most composition classes do not actually require students to write compositions. The classes consist of translating Japanese passages into English (Koike: 206).

Another problem that students have with English is that they do not know much about English-speaking cultures. Since language and culture are closely linked, a knowledge of the target culture is necessary for successful communication, but culture is taught neither extensively nor well in English classes in Japan (Kitao, 1978: 153).

Many Japanese say that they can read English, but they cannot speak it. However, this statement often seems to be just wishful thinking. Test results have shown that the general English ability of Japanese is rather poor (Takefuta: 2-11). What most Japanese students consider "reading" is the finding of a Japanese equivalent for each English word. They know the meaning of each word in Japanese and of the Japanese sentence, but they do not understand how the individual sentences fit together and what the meaning of the passage as a whole is (Kitao, 1983: 7).

One problem that college students have in reading is that they read slowly, usually only 50-100 words per minute (Kitao, 1983: 7). Because a certain amount of speed is necessary in reading for comprehending the overall content (Kitao and Miyamoto, 1983: 146), students often have difficulty understanding the main idea of the passage under study.

Teacher Training Programs

English teachers are trained in universities of education or in universities with teacher training courses. Teachers in junior and senior high schools are required to have teaching certificates. National requirements for the teaching certificate include six credits in English linguistics, six in English literature, two in composition and conversation, 16 credits in related subjects such as American literature, and fourteen credits in professional courses, including educational psychology, methods, educational principles, and practice teaching (Torii: 68-69). These requirements do not emphasize teaching methods, practice teaching or performance in English. For example, methods classes in teacher training programs in universities are usually too large to give students the opportunity to actually practice using the methods that they learn. Also, methods classes must cover the history and theory of English teaching, the law as it relates to English education, the Course of Study, and so on, as well as methods, so not much time can be spent studying specific techniques. Student teachers rarely have the opportunity to practice teach in more than a few classes. The practice teaching period usually only lasts two to three weeks,

including observation as well as practice.

Several times more graduates receive certificates than are eventually employed as teachers. As the last step in becoming a teacher in public schools, a graduate who has received a teaching certificate must also pass a prefectural or municipal employment examination. These examinations also emphasize theoretical knowledge rather than performance.

Ways of improving teacher training are frequently debated. Recently, several graduate schools in education have been started, offering training for future teachers and opportunities for practicing teachers to supplement thier educations.

English in Private Language Schools

Because high school and college classes are large, depend heavily on translation, do not offer much opportunity to build skills in aural/oral English, include students of widely varying proficiency, and have relatively few native English speakers as teachers, private language schools are popular in Japan (Oura and Tada: 157). The aims of classes at these schools are usually practical. They stress improving students' English proficiency and communication skills, especially in interpersonal communication. They also emphasize increasing the students' knowledge of English-speaking cultures and making them "international persons" (Itabashi: 172).

In language schools, classes are usually small, compared to those in high schools and colleges. Students are, in theory, placed according to their level of ability in English rather than their age or grade level, although in practice classes may be combined so that students of different levels are in the same class.

Students attend language schools for a variety of reasons. Some feel that it will be useful on the job; others plan to use it while traveling abroad or receiving foreign guests. For some students, studying English is largely a hobby, and others see it as proof of intellectual attainment (since people who can understand English are considered well educated) or a way to learn more about other cultures, since more emphasis is put on studying the cultures of English-speaking countries in language school classes than in high school or college classes (Oura and Tada: 158).

The format of classes in language schools varies widely. Some emphasize mainly oral/aural skills. Others offer classes in the four skills, either together or in different classes. Oral/aural classes are skill-based and communication-oriented. Reading classes in a language school would be likely to concentrate on extensive reading, in contrast to the intensive reading and translation generally found in high school or college reading classes. Writing classes focus on development of structural patterns and idiomatic expressions in free writing rather than translation (Nozawa: 20-22).

Teachers in language schools tend to prefer EFL textbooks published in the U.S. or U.K. or culture-oriented texts. They usually avoid the works of literature favored by college professors, preferring to give their students a more up-to-date

exposure to English.

Language schools often have some sort of objective criteria for judging the progress that their students make. For example, criteria for listening skills might be 60% comprehension of the news or more than fifty points on the listening section of the TOEFL.

Because language schools emphasize the practical aspects of oral English and teach about English speaking cultures, many of them have a variety of teaching media available for teachers, including tape recorders, language laboratories, films, video tapes, and slides. Teachers use tape recorders most frequently. Language laboratories seem to be underused in many language schools, since some teachers feel that they are too complicated and difficult to use or that there is not much good software available for language teaching. Recently, some schools have obtained computers, but they, too, tend to be underused due to a lack of good software (Nozawa: 22).

Many native English speakers are hired as part- or full-time teachers in language schools, mainly to teach aural/oral classes but also to teach composition and other related skills (Nozawa: 24).

Company English Programs

In Japan, many companies either provide their employees with language classes or send them to language schools. Since male Japanese employees usually stay with the same company for their entire working life, Japanese companies spend a relatively large amount of time and money on training them. When the need arises for employees with a certain skill, Japanese companies train the employees that they already have rather than hire new employees with that skill (Takubo: 75-76). Many of these companies need employees with a higher proficiency in foreign language, mainly English, and in communicating with people from other countries to carry on business activities. On the other hand, some companies offer English classes merely for the purpose of self-development.

The companies most likely to offer language programs to their employees are manufacturing companies (Kitao, 1984: 9). This is due to the fact that Japanese manufacturing companies have been rapidly expanding their international activities, and because their employees do not generally have much background in foreign languages.

Company classes usually emphasize speaking English and comprehending spoken English. Companies that who offer English classes seem to feel that oral/aural skills are the most important for their employees. For this reason, most of the teachers hired for company programs are native English speakers.

Company programs fall into three major categories—in-company programs, out-of-company programs, and study abroad (Hashimoto and Lau: 75-76). Most programs fall into the first two categories, the most common being in-company

programs. Most companies that offer these contract them out to independent language institutes, which handle the administrative and technical aspects of the program, including hiring teachers, choosing or developing texts and materials, and deciding on methods used. The person within the company who is responsible for the language program is usually not a professional in the language education field.

Some of these companies hold classes during working hours, but more normally, afterwards. A few companies offer early morning classes.

Some of the companies that offer English classes include proficiency testing as part of the training program for the purpose of motivating employees or to select employees for study abroad. A few of these companies use their own testing system, but most rely on such standard tests as STEP, ELEC, TOEFL, TOEIC and the Michigan Test.

Some companies send employees to outside language institutes. Companies that do this pay either all or part of the fees for the language classes. In some cases, the amount of aid depends on the employee's success in the course. Employees go to these classes during or after working hours.

Some companies send employees abroad specifically to improve their language proficiency. These employees are either trained in universities or in related companies. Some of the companies that send employees overseas for language training require them to stay with the company for a specified period of time after their return to Japan. Employees are sometimes rewarded for successful completion of the study-abroad program by being made candidates for further training for the company's international activities or immediate transfer to a position that allows them to use the language abilities developed abroad.

Company employees need more than linguistic competence. Some Japanese companies have begun to include an intercultural component to help their employees learn to communicate with native English speakers on business and social levels. The intercultural component develops intercultural communication skills and gives students a greater appreciation of their own culture (Takubo: 83-84).

Due to space limitations, we have been able to discuss only a few of the aspects of English teaching in Japan. However, we hope that this paper is a helpful introduction to English education in Japan for people from other countries.

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